DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 125 035 CS 501 441

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TITLE What Are You Saying When You Say Something?
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 17p.; Paper prepared for the special edition of "Communication, Journal of the Communication Association of the Pacific" compiled for the C.A.P. Convention (Kobe, Japan, June 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Language Usage; Linguistic Performance; *Linguistic Theory; *Oral Communication; *Semantics; Semiotics; Speech; Verbal Communication
IDENTIFIERS Austin (J L); Richards (I A); Searle (John); Speech Acts

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a brief but broad review of studies in semantics. Particular attention is given to I.A. Richards' analyses of utterances, to value statements which express moral or ethical judgments, and to recent efforts to formulate a logic of contextual implication. J.L. Austin's analysis of performative, or illocutionary, utterances and Searle's analysis of speech acts are discussed also. From this review, it is concluded that the meaning of an utterance is dependent not only on the words used but also on the context, intention, and the rules and conventions governing its type. (AA)

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WHAT ARE YOU SAYING WHEN YOU SAY SOMETHING?

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WHAT ARE YOU SAYING WHEN YOU SAY SOMETHING?

From the time men first began to use language, they have been interested in the meanings it carries and how it carries them, in how ideas pass or fail to pass from one person to another, in what the words we use signify and what they imply, in how they are intended by a speaker and how they are received or interpreted by a listener.

In the city states of Greece and Ionia as early as the fifth century B.C. the itinerate group of teachers and scholars known to us collectively as the Sophists were, in addition to their other studies, engaged in identifying the parts of speech, distinguishing between terms that apparently are synonymous, and, in the person of the sceptic Gorgias, inquiring whether if knowledge is attainable, it is, after all, communicable.

Half a century later Plato in his dialogues searched systematically for the meanings of such abstract terms as beauty, truth, and justice, and Aristotle wrote treatises in which he described various sorts of terms and analyzed the structure of sentences.

In more recent times, Bacon showed how ambiguous language might result in fallacies of interpretation, Locke developed a full-scale semantic, Kant drew a distinction between analytic and synthetic statements, and Benthan compared eulogistic and dyslogistic words.

But while interest in how language works and communication occurs is age-old, during the last forty or fifty years philosophers, psychologists, linguists, critics, and rhetoricians have focused their attention on these matters to an extent that is entirely unprecedented. And they have done this not only on the macroscopic but also on the microscopic level,

looking not only at large scale disposals of discourse but examining in the minutest detail different sorts of phrases and sentences, and the elements of which they are composed. As a result, they have thrown much fresh light on ancient problems and registered a genuine advance in our understanding of what it is we are saying when we say something.

One of the earliest writers to examine individual utterances in the microscopic way I have just described was the English philosopher and critic I. A. Richards.

As a young instructor of literature at Cambridge, Richards was distressed by the fact that even the best and the brightest of his students often were unable to grasp the plain prose sense or meaning of certain of the poems he asked them to analyze. Out of this experience, as he himself reports, Richards developed a life-long interest in what words are and how they mean--in different sorts or dimensions of meaning and what he came to call "interpretation" or the art of comprehending.

As early as 1923 when, with C. K. Ogden, he published his pioneering work The Meaning of Meaning, Richards already had clearly drawn in his own mind a distinction between the referential and emotive dimensions of language--between discourse which reports how the world is and discourse designed to express or arouse feelings or to form attitudes.

It was, however, in his book Practical Criticism published in 1929, that he first presented an analysis of utterances deserving of our attention.

When we say something, declared Richards, our saying actually has four elements or constituents--sense, feeling, tone, and intention.

Perhaps it will be best to quote him directly.

We speak to say something, and when we listen we expect something to be said. We use words to direct our hearers' attention upon some state of affairs, to present to them some items for consideration and to excite in them some thoughts about these items. [This reportive or directive function of an utterance we may call its "sense."]

But [second], as a rule, [we] have some feeling about these items . . . and we use language also to express these feelings, this nuance of interest. . . .

Third, the speaker has ordinarily an attitude to his listener. He chooses or arranges his words differently as his audience varies, in automatic or deliberate recognition of his relation to them. This adaptation determines the "tone" of his utterance.

Finally, apart from what he says (Sense), his attitude to what he is talking about (Feeling), and his attitude to his listener (Tone), there is the speaker's intention, his aim, conscious or unconscious, the effect he is endeavoring to promote. . . . Unless we know what he is trying to do [that is, his "intention"], we can hardly estimate the measure of his success.

To repeat, then, according to Richards, whenever we engage in the act of saying, we report a "sense," express a "feeling" toward that sense, indicate an attitude toward our listener, and consciously or unconsciously suggest an aim or "intention."

Some twenty-five years after Practical Criticism was published,

Richards returned to the problem of analyzing utterances in his essay entitled "Toward a Theory of Comprehending," and, as might be expected in view of the time elapsed, here he presents a seven-part rather than a four-part scheme. A sentence, we here are told, may do all or some of seven different kinds of work. (1) It may be used to indicate (that is, to point or select); (2) to characterize (or say something about); (3) to realize (come alive to, wake up to, present); (4) to value (care about); (5) to influence (change or keep as it is); (6) to control (manage, direct, run, administer itself); and (7) to purpose (see, pursue, try, endeavor to be or to do).

Obviously, in some cases certain of these factors will shrink toward the null, so that while in swearing, valuing, influencing, and purposing are dominant, in the statements of mathematics only indicating, controling, and purposing matter. In all instances, however, purposing, we should note, always is present. "Without purposing," says Richards, "without the feed-forward which structures all activity, [there is] no utterance and no comprehending."

If time allowed, it would be interesting to say more about Richards and his pioneering work in these areas. But, unfortunately, this would only lead us to some unhappy reflections on his attempts to develop a Basic English and to his responsibility as a forerunner of the General Semanticists. Let us, therefore, pass on to pleasanter and more profitable topics.

So far as the meaning of individual sentences is concerned, one of the best plowed areas--and an area which certainly deserves attention in light of our present interest--is the study of value statements, and

particularly of that class of value statements which express moral or ethical judgments.

What, really, is one saying when he says that something is "good" or "bad," or "right" or "wrong," or that it "ought" or "ought not" to be done? Although at first hearing the question may strike you as trivial, let me assure you that this is, by no means, the case. For the past half-century, the analytic, or as they are sometimes called the meta-ethicists, have filled a good sized library of books and journals with not very successful attempts to answer it.

Let us take an example. When you utter the sentence "X is good," are you attributing a natural property to X, just as you would be were you to assert that X is round or red? Or are you only expressing your own attitude, your own inner feelings, about the person, situation, or act in question? Or are you really making a statement at all, or merely attempting to evoke some reaction from your listener, just as you might be doing were you to voice the expletives "Harrah!" or "Alas!"? Or, as a so-called "modified emotivist" might hold, are you actually combining the first and second of the possibilities I have mentioned--that is, both making a statement and also expressing a feeling, so that your utterance has two components, one descriptive or cognitive and the other emotive or evocative?

Upon analysis, all of the possibilities I have thus far mentioned reveal serious shortcomings, so that few persons today are apt to accept any of them, at least in the rather bald and naive way I have described them here. Instead, ethicists now tend to talk in the more complex languages of prescriptivism, G-words, and the like--intricacies

into which, fortunately, we have no need to enter here. Suffice it to say that through the efforts of many writers dating from G. E. Moore through Charles Stevenson, R. M. Hare and P. H. Nowell-Smith, it now is clear beyond question that "moral" words are somehow different from other words--that they carry auras of meaning which, strive as we may, we can never with complete satisfaction translate into non-moral or natural terms. Moreover, to some extent, at least, these meanings are supervenient; that is, they exist over and above whatever basic descriptive sense the term may carry. Therefore, when, for example, we tell someone that Route 380 is a good road, we not only are telling him that it is straight, and level, and well-marked, and in a good state of repair, but we are also issuing 380 a ticket of commendation which in many ways is just as untranslatable as is "good" in the strictly enthical or moral sense in which we first considered it.

A third development bearing upon our interest in what we may, in fact, be saying when we say something consists of the attempts made during the last decade or so to formulate a logic of contextual or, as it is sometimes called, pragmatic implication.

Since the time of Aristotle, logicians have with infinite care investigated the types of inference that can validly be made from one proposition to another. But what of utterances that are not propositions--questions, commands, interjections, wishes, and the like? Are implications of various sorts here present also? And does strict logical implication, no matter how precise or detailed it may be, exhaust all that is useful to know about the relationships between propositions themselves? Does not every-day linguistic practice have embedded within

it a logic supplementary to and different from that of formal deductive systems? The answer, as Moore was among the first to recognize, is that obviously it does, for as reasonable persons we daily draw what we believe to be appropriate inferences not only from propositions but also from utterances of many other sorts, as well as from outward appearances and overt actions. Indeed, we will find it useful to approach this phase of our subject by considering an action rather than a language statement. I borrow my example from the English philosopher C. K. Grant.

Suppose, says Grant. we observe a man planting seeds in the soil. From this, we may and commonly do infer both psychological and pragmatic implications of his action. Under the first head fall such propositions as "The man believes the seeds will grow," "He hopes the seeds will grow," and "He believes that conditions of soil, climate, etc. are suitable to bring about the seeds' germination." But also from the same act follow the non-psychological empirical propositions "The seeds will grow," and "The conditions are suitable for the seeds growth."

Similarly, the act of selling implies that the seller owns the article or is acting as the owner's authorized agent, and that the goods in question are free from charges and encumbrances. Under normal circumstances, the act of marrying implies that a person is not already married, is at least sixteen years of age, and has passed the necessary medical tests.

But our present interest is in verbal utterances rather than in overt behaviors--in the general problem of what our utterances mean and what they imply. How does the logic of pragmatic implication apply to the world of words?

Just as in the case of performing physical actions, so does the pronouncing of sentences--under the view held by the contextualists--have both psychological and pragmatic implications. Thus the person who says indicatively "The apple is red" implies that he believes this to be the case, and may be taken as so believing. The uttering of an interrogative implies that one desires an answer and assumes that his interlocutor can give it. The uttering of an imperative implies that the speaker wants obedience and expects to get it. Moreover, each of these modes of discourse, by the simple fact of its existence, implies the presence of a person other than the speaker.

To continue with our examples: If I say "Smith is returning tomorrow," my statement pragmatically implies "Smith has gone away." If I issue the imperative "Find out where Smith has gone" or ask the question "Where has Smith gone?" I make the same implication, while in each case, of course, I also imply by my remark that there is such a person as Smith. Similarly, the statement "There is an elephant in the closet" implies pragmatically "There is a closet," "The closet is bigger than the elephant" and "There is at least one elephant in the house."

Even verbal stress and intonational pattern, as has frequently been observed, may have pragmatic implications. From "He said he was home in bed at 10 o'clock on the night of the crime" one may properly infer that I believe he lied to me when he said this. For, as a general rule, the purpose of stressing that a person says something is to distinguish between the words and the facts; and this would have no point unless there actually was, or I believed there to be, a discrepancy.

As Grant, among others, has taken care to point out, pragmatic implications of the sort I have been describing are not properly to be regarded

either as empirical generalizations based on the cumulative experience of many observers, or as entailments recognizable a priori. Rather they make a tacit appeal to the customary behavior of reasonable persons acting and speaking under normal circumstances in the affairs of everyday life. Such persons, we commonly assume, (1) intend the probable consequences of their actions or utterances, and perform them only under appropriate circumstances; (2) believe or wish what they are stating--for normally no purpose is served by representing oneself as believing or wishing what one does not believe or wish; and (3) have reason to suppose that the propositions pragmatically implied by their actions and utterances are well founded--that they are more likely than not to be true.

But enough of the mysteries of contextual or pragmatic implication. In the time remaining to me I should like to say something about two of the most widely discussed and the most significant of recent developments in the philosophy of language. I refer to J. L. Austin's work with performative or illocutionary utterances and to John L. Searle's analysis of speech acts. First to Austin.

Statements, or as I have here sometimes called them propositions, are by definition utterances that are in principle at least capable to being shown true or false: "Grass is green," "Cats chase mice," "Oral examinations are a waste of time," and the like.

Now as Austin recognized there is a kind of utterance which looks like a statement and grammatically would in all probability be classified as one. It is a perfectly straightforward declaration or pronouncement, free of such ambiguous and confusing words as "good," "right," "ought," and "could," and, as a rule, containing an ordinary, every-day verb in the first person present singular indicative. Yet, as will at once

become apparent, it is different from a statement in that it could not possibly be either true or false.

Consider some examples as offered by Austin himself. Suppose that during the course of the marriage ceremony, and in response to the appropriate question, I say "I do" ("I take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife"). Or suppose that I tread on your toe and say "I apologize." Or suppose that I have a bottle of champagne in my hand and say "I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth." Or, finally, suppose I say "I bet you a dollar it will rain tomorrow."

What am I saying when I say these things? Obviously, I am not inquiring, or exclaiming, or explaining; nor am I predicting a future event or giving a report of an action that has already occurred. Rather we would hold that in saying what I do I am actually performing the action in question. When I say "I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth" I am not describing the christening ceremony; I am actually performing the christening. And when I say "I do (take this woman to be my lawfully wedded wife) I am not reporting on a marriage; I am indulging in one.

Of course, what I say must be said under the proper circumstances; must be said seriously rather than in jest, must reflect the established conventions of the society in which the pronouncement is made, etc. But if these and similar conditions are met, for all practical purposes, my saying is tantamount to or actually constitutes my doing, so that the sort of utterance I make may, as Austin suggests, quite properly be given the somewhat awkward, but nonetheless descriptive name of "performative."

Now there is a great deal that might--and, indeed, has been said--

about the nature of performative utterances--those utterances in which to say something is to do something, or in the saying of which we do something, or by the saying of which we do something in the way of affecting the verbal or physical behaviors of others. If time allowed, we might also talk about some of the difficulties Austin got into in attempting to trace the finer distinctions between performatives and statements, or as he called them "constatives." For, after all, do not the assertions "The grass is green" or "Cats chase mice" have implicit within them the words "I state that"? And when thus fleshed out, are they not the same or at least terribly close to those utterances Austin wanted to set off from statements proper and to consider as pure performatives?

But in the hasty and altogether too superficial treatment of the subject here we shall have to forego such tempting excursions and be satisfied with a brief review of Austin's own attempt to extricate himself from the problem as he developed it in his book How to Do Things with Words.

Here, after despairing of drawing a reasonably sharp distinction between constatives and performatives on either grammatical or lexical grounds, Austin differentiates among three basic types of utterances or speech acts to which he gives the names locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. Roughly stated, a locutionary act, according to Austin, is an act of saying something; an illocutionary act, an act performed in the saying of something; and a perlocutionary act, an act of saying which achieves or brings about discernible consequences or effects. Locutionary, "He said that Nixon knew about the breakin at Watergate";

illocutionary, "He argued that Nixon knew about the breakin at Watergate"; perlocutionary, "He persuaded me that Nixon knew about the breakin at Watergate."

As Austin himself recognized, while this refined breakdown of speech acts was capable of catching certain fundamental distinctions buried in his earlier analysis, even it was not sufficiently sensitive to account for all of the ways in which we use language. For instance, it leaves unaccounted such common every day speech acts as "insinuating" or "evincing an emotion." Moreover, an illocutionary act is also necessarily locutionary--we must perform an act of saying something in order to perform an act in saying something. And a perlocutionary act may be both locutionary and illocutionary, as well. That is, if my interlocutor is to convince me, he must both say something and engage in tha act of arguing. Clearly, the problem of sorting out the nature of our talk--of finding out what it is we really are saying when we say something--is a complicated one that does not permit of easy solutions.

Yet, I should not like to leave you with too pessimistic a picture, for difficult though the problem is, progress is being made and different dimensions or properties of language constantly are being isolated. We are, for example, coming ever more clearly to recognize that in addition to having a sense or meaning an utterance also carries a certain force.

In a way, of course, the difference between the "proposition expressing" and the "force indicating" aspects of what we say has long been recognized, and is, indeed, embodied at least indirectly in the familiar distinction between the denotation and connotation of a word or expression. In recent years, however, the matter has been much more thoroughly explored and, in one form or another, has cropped up in a surprising number of

places. It furnishes, for example, the foundation for Stephen Toulmin's analysis of modal terms in his influential book, The Uses of Argument. It is reflected in R. M. Hare's breakdown of ethical sentences into phrastic and neustic elements. It is related to the previously mentioned distinction between cognitive and emotive meaning as found in the writings of Charles Stevenson and other members of the modified emotivist school of analytic ethics.

One of the fullest and most interesting developments along this line, however, is found in the work of John R. Searle, and particularly in his book entitled Speech Acts.

In this book, Searle starts from the premise that speaking a language is a matter of performing certain sorts of speech acts--the acts of making statements, giving commands, asking questions, issuing promises, and, more abstractly, the acts of referring and predicating--and doing this in accordance with certain established rules of conventions by which these acts are governed. Language, in short, is, according to Searle, a rule-governed phenomenon, and speaking a language is engaging in a rule-governed form of behavior.

Given this premise, it follows that any account or description of such illocutionary acts as I have just mentioned will, of necessity, entail attention to the appropriate rules, and, further, being subject to such rules is what gives linguistic expressions the meanings they possess. Therefore, Searle first attempts to state a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the performance of a particular kind of speech act and then to extract from these conditions a set of semantic rules for the use of the linguistic devices which mark the utterance as a speech

act of a given sort. For this task he uses as his paradigm the speech act of promising.

According to Searle, a full and non-defective act of promising entails three basically different sorts of requirements of conditions. Some, such as normal output and input capabilities on the part of the speaker and listener are "essential" in the sense that without them the act could not be performed. Others, such as the utterance of a sentence embodying a promise and the predication thereby of a future act on the part of the speaker isolate the "sense" or proposition-expressing aspect of the act. Still other conditions are basically psychological or contextual in nature in that they involve an intention on the part of the speaker, a recognition by the speaker that the issuance of the promise places him under an obligation, and a recognition by the listener of the intent expressed and the obligation undertaken by the speaker.

Taken together, says Searle, these conditions and others which for the sake of simplification I have not mentioned, describe the various circumstances which are necessary--the conditions which must be met--if the phrase "I promise that . . ." is actually to constitute a promise and not merely to stand as a string of words parasitic upon a genuine act of promising--upon what we are really saying when in the full and nondefective way we say "I promise."

As can well imagine, philosophers being as they are, Searle's analysis of speech acts has not gone uncriticized by his colleagues. With details of this sort, however, we need not here be concerned. What is important for us to recognize is that Searle's work, along with that of many other writers, clearly brings out the fact that when we say

something out utterance not only carries a certain sense or meaning, but also possesses a certain force, and that this force like sense itself is, in the final analysis, determined by social convention.

By this time, you probably have heard a good deal more than you care to know about some of the things we may be, and indeed in all probability are, saying when we say something. Therefore, rather than burden you further I shall at this point conclude by assuring you that though my survey has by no means been narrow, it has done no more than sample at random from an extensive and ever-growning field of study. I have, for example, spared you descriptions of the now quite ancient distinction between sense and nonsense based upon the positivists' principle of verifiability. Nor have I said anything about the semiotic of Charles Morris, or the mysteries of generative grammar, or the semantic differential of Charles Osgood, or the doctrines of the General Semanticists, or the efforts by Carnap and Russel to build a system of logical syntax as a supplement to grammatical syntax.

Even the loose and hasty excursion on which I have taken you, however, suggests one general conclusion you may wish to consider further. And this that what we say and the meaning and force our utterances carry are more than functions of words alone, but are, to a large degree, also dependent on the context in which what we say is said, on the purpose our saying serves, and on the rules and conventions by which utterances of a given type are governed. As the nature of each of these factors and the interplay among them continue to be studied, we may, I believe, expect additional and ever more useful light to be thrown on the baffling problem of what it is we are saying when we say something.